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AUTHOR Larkey, Linda Kathryn
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ABSTRACT

A study illustrated an interpretive approach to investigating personal commitment during radical organizational transition by examining how people talk metaphorically about commitment and identification as a process. A questionnaire was constructed to be used in phone interviews with six employee assistance program (EAP) counselors who contract with companies currently going through changes. Data were gathered from nine companies and were organized by recurring metaphorical themes. Relative to each theme was a set of dynamics (interpreted and labeled by the researcher), and statements or phrases that reflected those dynamics. Results revealed that family themes were the most frequently mentioned. Reports of changes in identity were emphasized, from a family identity of belonging, closeness and support, to a business identity leaving employees feeling used, abandoned, deceived. Additionally, vehicle and lover metaphors were also used frequently, but indirectly. Employees never used the words "vehicle" or "lover," but made implications for these types of relationships. Most of these themes reflected the past condition in contrast to the present as states of conflict, but they also reflected combinations of identities beyond a simple commitment to the organization as a whole. A more complete study of an organization in transition using direct collection of data, particularly on-line discourse, is called for. (One table of thematic phrases is included; one appendix containing phone interview questions and 36 references are attached.) (KEH)

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Organizational Commitment in Times of Change:

An Alternative Research Approach

Linda Kathryn Larkey

Arizona State University

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Organizational Commitment in Times of Change

An Alternative Research Approach

Commitment has been an important topic of study in management literature for over three decades, and yet apparently remains an elusive topic; important because of the perception that committed employees will stay put and carry out company goals, and elusive because research has approached commitment from many different perspectives but has yet to produce a coherent picture. Most of the variables correlated with organizational commitment, such as job design or decision-making practices, are altered by mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, or reorganization. Therefore, it is during such times that commitment is most likely to be influenced.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review the traditional approach to the study of commitment in the organizational literature, critique this approach, and suggest an alternative perspective intended to add to the understanding of commitment during times of organizational upheaval. To support the assertion that a new approach will add value to the current understanding of commitment, a set of data has been collected and discussed to begin to explore the advantages of the suggested approach.

Rationale for Suggested Approach

Commitment has traditionally been researched and understood as one of many human elements that must be managed. It has not

received the same attention as job satisfaction or motivation (Staw, 1984), but has certainly taken the time of many researchers who have looked for ways to manage commitment, hoping to decrease turnover and absenteeism, and improve performance (Buchanan, 1974; Cook & Wall, 1980; Krackardt & Porter, 1985). Commitment is not only important to understand because of the impact it has on these critical human resources issues, but it must be recognized as a core issue because it lies at the root of human capacity to be influenced (Salancik, 1978).

Although relationships have been found among hypothesized causes, commitment, and certain desired outcomes, most of these correlational studies have been conducted under static conditions (Decotiis & Summers, 1987; Porter et al., 1974; Steers, 1977). The variables studied--the antecedents and consequences of commitment--have mostly been factors that are the measurable results of long ingrained practices. Under such conditions, commitment may be seen as having an established equilibrium, a concurrent stability with the variables assessed. Correlations found under these conditions are worth interpreting for application in times of stability.

In addition to the antecedent and outcome variables, there are variables that have been used to compose a survey (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) to measure commitment itself. These

variables describe the components of commitment, and are used to evaluate levels of commitment based on these components.

An often quoted definition of commitment is "the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization...as characterized by a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; c) a definite desire to maintain organizational membership." (Porter et al., 1974, pg 604; see also, Buchanan, 1974). These factors that comprise commitment are all subject to change as the organization changes. A survey that operationalizes and measures these factors (Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979) has been shown to be valuable for measuring commitment in times of stability, but it is not too helpful for predicting turnover or changes in commitment level, nor is it able to give a moving picture of the dynamics during change.

Of course, the survey was not intended to predict such changes, but predictability and understanding of the dynamic process is becoming increasingly important. Change is becoming the norm in organizational life (Ginzberg, 1985; Kanter, 1983; Toffler, 1985), and the issue of commitment has taken on new complexity. Uncertainty and anxiety during such upheavals have been shown to result in turnover, power struggles among those who stay, poor job related attitudes, poor performance, and reduced commitment (Buono & Bowditch, 1989).

Valuable as previous studies have been, they primarily focus on overtly expressed variables which have been created over time and socialized into entrenched perceptions. In the later reconceptualization of commitment, it will be demonstrated that these perceptions are disturbed by organizational change, and that the reification of new perceptions occurs progressively through changes in symbolic activity. Symbolic activity leading to such changes in commitment likely will precede the change (Cheney, 1983a). For this reason, it is suggested that commitment be studied from the perspective of symbolic activity, and particularly during times of change, rather than in snapshot form.

Review of Traditional Approaches to Commitment

Just as the traditional approach to organizational behavior and management is steeped in a positivist perspective, with an emphasis on understanding which variables lead to what outcomes across situations (Putnam, 1983), so also is the study of commitment. The bulk of commitment research attempts to isolate fixed organizational factors that lead to commitment, and purport that the resulting commitment leads to predictable consequences. Another small group of studies has ventured to explore how commitment is related to socialization experiences. Each of these approaches will be discussed.

The Antecedent/Consequences Model

The strongest voice in the literature on this topic arises from a series of seminal studies by Mowday and associates (1982). Their findings have suggested that the major antecedents of commitment can be grouped into the categories of a) personal characteristics, b) job or role related characteristics, c) work experiences and d) organizational structure characteristics. Within these categories, a multitude of variables have been measured alongside commitment, revealing strong positive correlations between commitment and such factors as tenure, job scope, participation in decision-making, and worker ownership (Mowday, et al., 1982; Oliver, 1984).

On the other side of the equation are the hypothesized consequences of commitment. The aforementioned instrument for measuring commitment (Mowday et al., 1979; see also, Cook & Wall, 1980) has been used to predict attendance, turnover, and performance. There is strong support for the assertion that high levels of measured commitment will predict less absenteeism and turnover in the near future. But this measured form of commitment is apparently not enduring. Porter et al. (1976) has shown that commitment declines 1 to 3 months before an employee leaves, and that in the group studied, earlier measures of commitment give little clue as to who the stayers and leavers would eventually be. In a similar, earlier study, commitment again was shown to be a

poor predictor of turnover early on, but as the exit approached, measures of commitment dropped considerably more than other measures of job satisfaction (Porter et al., 1974). It is worth demonstrating the relationship between commitment and turnover, but the short time frames for change of both variables makes it difficult to use such instrumentation for predicting turnover.

In addition, commitment has not been successfully used to predict performance. Steers (1977) postulated that the most committed employees would be the better performers in an organization under study. When results contradicted this, he postulated that the committed employees were nicely settled, loyal residents of the company. Had they been looking for challenge and thrills, they would have gone somewhere else, since the particular organization studied did not promote high standards for performance nor challenge people to innovate.

A comprehensive study to map out previously investigated antecedents/consequences was undertaken by Decotiis and Summers (1987). The resulting path analysis demonstrates the relationships more clearly, indicating strength of correlations. They find that personal characteristics play a minimal role in the prediction of commitment, but positive perceptions of the organizations' structure, human resources practices, and climate, seem to influence commitment much more.

Although the antecedents/consequences model has produced useful ways to think about managing commitment, there may be some value to looking for additional ways to view and study the issue to expose the dynamics of commitment in times of change.

The Socialization Model

Rather than measure independently constructed organizational variables, this model views the interactive experience and perceptions of socialization as a major variable contributing to commitment. Although socialization experiences can be seen as yet another antecedent to commitment (Pascale, 1985), this view has a twist on it that acknowledges that socialization is both an experience and a product of behavior.

Salancik (1977) defines commitment in terms of actual behavior, and predicts commitment strength as a function of the explicitness, irrevocability, and volition of an act. Guzley (1988) looks at how socialization and perceived supervisory interaction (rather than the results of these dynamics, such as job satisfaction or role clarity) are related to commitment. She finds a positive correlation for both. In this case, commitment is seen as the product of processes perceived by the employee in interaction, rather than an independent entity removed from employee involvement.

Another example of the socialization view of commitment is a study by Eisenberg et al. (1982) which finds that both job

involvement and communication network involvement have moderate effects on commitment. But there is a disordinal relationship between job and network involvement relative to commitment--workers who are less involved in their jobs are more committed to the organization in the presence of high network involvement. This may suggest a replacement of one behavior, network involvement, in the absence of another commitment-building behavior, job involvement. But it may also imply that socialization is a result of commitment, rather than the other way around. To complicate this further, Krackhardt & Porter (1985) find that employee attitudes about the organization are apparently affected by the closeness of their relationship with leavers. However, the closer an employee felt to a leaver, the more satisfied he was likely to be. Is it possible that a prior attitude created the socialization, rather than the other way around? Such a possibility is not likely to not be sorted out by traditional approaches to research which search for single variables in a progression of cause and effect events, even if those variables include such process oriented factors as socialization.

Also, the idea that fulfilled expectations lead to commitment has been explored in several studies (DeCotiis & Summers, 1987; Newman, 1974; Oliver, 1984; Porter et al., 1974). The initial expectations are often set by conversations with superiors, and

developed (either disappointed or fulfilled) by interactions with peers and others, suggesting that this is another of the variables that is based on employee perceptions and the socialization process.

Although the socialization model has potential for describing commitment in terms of process rather than product, for the most part it has been treated (and measured) as just another static variable, leaving out the dynamic exchange aspect that normally defines the construct of socialization. At least these studies begin to touch on the idea that commitment is created by and experienced through communication and socialization processes; it is more complex than single variable or path analysis designs would tell.

Shortcomings and Strengths of Traditional Approaches

The antecedent/consequences model has exposed some variables that can be manipulated to increase commitment in stable environments. Application of these principles is possible even during times of change if the complex of variables can be held fairly constant. But this is usually not the case.

The socialization model begins to touch on the complex nature of commitment, indicating further potential leverage. Van Maanen (1978) suggests that it is easy to get commitment-so easy that he warns against the unscrupulous use of our advanced socialization technology to coopt individuals' beliefs into

organizational commitments that may later be seen as dysfunctional, or may wield power over employees without their awareness or explicit consent. Van Maanen calls for more conscious use of the orientation/socialization process to balance organizational needs with employee value systems, rather than use our skills to twist employees to meet the needs of an organizational regime.

Another important point raised by Van Maanen is that the processes that inculcate commitment happen most easily (and most logically) during times of transition, either transition into the organization or into another position. It is this unusual focus of transition or "breakpoints" that is so often missed in research. The following sections suggest that these are ideal times to study the nature of commitment, because individuals are vulnerable, and the issue of commitment is more salient to them and therefore more fully represented in discourse.

Recommended Approach to Understanding Commitment

Two suggestions are broached as a call for research that would enhance understanding of how commitment is created and experienced: 1) redefine commitment in terms of identification as a social process (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987); 2) use an interpretive approach to studying commitment during radical change to discover how people talk symbolically about commitment and identification as a process.

Advantages of this Approach

First, a better understanding of commitment under conditions of upheaval will likely be revealed on a case by case basis. Then, as a product of studying the construction of commitment, we would gain an improved picture (movie picture, that is) of how commitment is formed and/or dissolved in the communication of individuals and groups (Jones, 1988). Third, this approach would help dispel the image of commitment as being the result of specific factors, as if the organization were the perpetrator of the individual target's commitment, but rather a more realistic and pluralistic image would be created (Putnam, 1983), demonstrating the effects of communication content and process between individuals, among groups and diffused through the organization.

A Working Definition of Commitment

Although "identification" has been used in the previous review as a partial definition or component of commitment, it will now be expanded to subsume the concept of commitment.

Mowday (1982) reviews ten different studies of organizational commitment and the associated definitions. The definitions are widely divergent, ranging from phrases like "willingness of social actors to give their energy and loyalty to social systems" (Kanter) to "when a person, by making a side-bet, links extraneous interests with a consistent line of activity" (Becker). The definitions reviewed by Mowday have three elements

in common: 1) internal dispositions, such as willingness or affective attachment, 2) actions, such as activities of involvement or socially accepted behaviors, and 3) transactions, such as investments or side-bets.

All three of these elements are inherent in the description of the phenomenon of identification discussed by Cheney (1983b) in his review of the rhetoric of identification according to Kenneth Burke. The internal disposition is the tendency toward membership as an antidote to the estrangement created in division of labor. As expressed by Burke, "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division" (cited in Cheney, 1983b, p. 145). In other words, the nature of organizing predisposes us toward the tendency to reach out and belong, become a part of. Actions are the behaviors motivated by this predisposition, whether it is behaving in the ways that have been demonstrated to be socially acceptable, or in ways that support and contribute to the identity, goals, and values of the

organization. Transactions are the interdependent links that grow over time. As the actions of initial identity lead to investments over time, the actor becomes entrenched in social exchanges, not just exchanges with individuals, but exchanges with the organization as an entity. With each action, the relationship is

confirmed, building and renewing an outward form of commitment/identification.

These three components, internal disposition, action and transaction, work together to describe the process of identification and develop a picture of commitment that is more fully based on interactive processes. Because of the three-dimensional process orientation, this definition of identification will be used as the basis for suggested exploration of commitment in the following sections. Although identification is usually seen as an internal construct, it can also be seen as expressive and interactive, each view being necessary to the understanding of commitment. It is capable of expressing the process that undergirds commitment, as well as
changes in the process, and requires tools for study that expose the symbolic dynamics that comprise the process.

Studying the Language of Commitment/Identification

Defining commitment as the process of identification requires something other than the traditional approach
for study. With the reconceptualization commitment as something that is created by and, yet, recreates social structure, it is more useful to treat it as an element of organizational culture. Smircich (1987) distinguishes several views of culture, varying from "culture as an external variable" (such as cross-

organizational studies of cultures alleged to be "effective", pg. 235) to culture as knowledge structures and patterns of discourse. These last two views--culture as knowledge structure and as patterns of symbolic discourse--require an interpretive approach for study. By looking for the knowledge systems or scripts that guide behavior and the symbols that link meaning to action in individual organizations, it should be possible to discover a richer description of commitment as defined by the process of identification.

A total cultural study would yield far more data than is useful to the understanding of commitment alone. Instead, guidelines are recommended for narrowing a study to the important aspects of culture expressed in terms of identification and communitment. Two general themes drawn from the field of interpersonal communication may help to guide the open-ended exploration of commitment using interpretive approaches: relational themes, and multiple identification.

Relational themes. Commitment is a term often used in the context of relationship -- being involved with and intending to continue involvement is a sign of intentional or even incidental commitment (Owen, 1984). Research on relational themes sheds light on how peoples experience and express commitment in two ways.

First, commitment is something that is discussed and

wrestled with more during times of transition (Owen, 1984). The parallel in organizations is apparent (Van Maanen, 1978). A measure of commitment during times of stability may be gained via pencil and paper tests. However, the rich language that describes commitment in its formative or dynamic stages is more likely to occur during breakpoints, or times when one is led to question the ongoing nature of relationship.

Second, the interpretive approach to relational research has improved understanding of how people conceptualize or experience their ongoing relational episodes. This application can bring a richness to understanding individual's perceptions of the relationship with the organization. Often this conceptualization is expressed in terms of metaphors that undergird the relational theme (Owen, 1985). As will be seen in the interpretive data to follow, this can be a useful way to get at the emergent nature (Monge & Eisenberg, 1987) of organizational commitment.

Multiple identifications. Relationship provides a view of commitment that implies that the individual is involved with a single entity, the organization. To discover multiple identifications, it is helpful to explore language, behavior and symbolic meanings. This can be found through on-line examination of interaction or through analysis of written or reported information that reflects these enduring symbols (Cheney, 1983b).

Identification is more than a one-on-one relationship. It centers on the image of the organization and its goals, but it is experienced through the day to day exchanges with others, acting out shared rules and norms, and making decisions that fit the purposes of "we the people." Who "we" refers to can be seen in the language of the identification process. When the organization is in unity, it is difficult to distinguish individuals' potential multiple identities, but in pluralistic situations (which are likely in times of upheaval), polarities are revealed on many political dimensions that would otherwise be hidden (Bridges, 1986). In this sense, identification is a continually changing experience, depending on context, often engendering conflict among the internal selves (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987).

One interpretive method that may be useful for exposing such relational themes is metaphor analysis, whether viewing commitment as a single relational allegory, or as multiple identifications. Metaphor analysis has been used successfully in understanding relational themes (Owen, 1985), and may give understanding of both an individual's experience of involvement and identity with the organization, as well as give clues as to which faction, group or entity individuals are identifying with, particularly in situations of change or conflict (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987, and Carbaugh, 1988).

To demonstrate the potential of this approach, a set of pilot interviews with employee assistance counselors were conducted to obtain a preliminary set of data regarding metaphors of commitment and identification during times of organizational upheaval. The counseling context is often viewed as an arena in which the client teaches the counselor about herself, her world-view, and the meaning she attaches to experiences, making it a useful context for exploring metaphors of commitment. This puts the counselor in a similar position to the ethnographer (Spradley, 1979).

What follows is a description of the interpretive study and the rich information that was gathered.

A Preliminary Study of Metaphors of Change

Employee assistance programs (EAP's) are often set up by employers to provide help for chemically dependent employees, but frequently also provide counseling for coping with general life problems, reducing stress, and giving direction for careers. Since employees of all levels often increase their utilization of EAP services during times of organizational stress and change, it is likely that the counselors of such services will hear much about employee reactions during these times. The pilot study conducted tapped these counselors as potential resources for learning about metaphors of identity and commitment.

Method

A questionnaire was constructed (Appendix A) to be used in phone interviews with six EAP counselors who contract with companies currently going through radical change (i.e., reorganization, merger, acquisition, or downsizing). The interviews began with the researcher describing the pilot study, the nature of confidentiality (identity of counselors, clients, or client companies would not be revealed), and the need for reporting clients' reactions to change rather than counselors' interpretations of reactions.

It was noted early in the interviews that counselors tended to use metaphors to describe their client's situations. For example, one counselor had a special interest in sports psychology and frequently used phrase like "a whole new ball game", and "struck out" in his descriptions. For this reason, the interviewer repeatedly asked "was that your metaphor, or the client's?" Additionally, counselors were asked to refer to notes from the client sessions. Five of the six counselors complied with this request, and four of these stated that notes were taken from session verbatim rather than interpretively.

During brief phone interviews (20 to 45 minutes), the researcher asked prepared questions, added probing questions as needed, and took notes of the responses. Each counselor shared observations of the language and metaphors used by their clients

that related to perceptions and feelings about the organization and changes.

Results

Using a format for analysis similar to Owen's (1984) analysis of relational themes, the data from the interviews is organized by recurring metaphorical themes (Table 1). Relative to each theme is a set of dynamics (interpreted and labeled by the researcher), and statements or phrases that reflect those dynamics. These are ordered by company (coded A, B, C ... nine companies were represented by the six counselors) to help the reader see the variety of dynamics, some of which vary within, some between organizations. Incidentally, in all interviews, the counselors mentioned that sharp increases in EAP utilization (by all levels of employees) occurred before and during the changes.

THEMATIC PHRASES
Table 1

COMPANY	THEME/ (DYNAMIC)	PHRASES
	FAMILY:	
A	(disbanded)	We felt like family before, but now it's everyman for himself.
	(abandoned)	I feel abandoned. They talk to me only when they want something.
B	(common enemy)	We really drew together before the buy-out. We felt like our little family was invincible against the world.
	(rivalry)	Under the new leadership, we can't seem to get along; there's lots of rivalry
C	(excommunication)	It's like some of us have been disowned (after cuts had been made), and now they're trying to make it up to us by being extra attentive. It hurts too much. They can't make up it.
	(denial)	We're supposed to act like this is going to be OK, pretend that things are better.
	(smothered)	We're being loved to death, squeezed to death.
F	(identity)	We went from a family to a business in just one year.
	(deception)	They hired me into a small family. Now it's an enormous national organization- I don't know everyone personally anymore.
	(support)	I've lost my support system.
H	(distance)	We used to be so close-knit, people cared, they would talk to you. No one has time to talk, unless they need you.
	(identity)	I used to be proud to work here. Now I focus on other things in my life to feel OK.

Table 1, continued

COM-PANY	THEME/ (DYNAMIC)	PHRASES
	VEHICLE or MACHINE:	
A	(disaster)	We're tearing along at this awful pace, heading for disaster. I keep thinking something's going to pull us out of the fire.
	(jump ship)	I'm on the verge of bailing out.
C	(aligned)	We were all finally going in the same direction -- then this.
D	(isolated)	I'm not connected, geographically distant -- I feel like I'll burn out, isolated from the energy source.
	(burn-out)	I feel like I'm short circuiting people.
G	(shipmates)	We got closer as the market for our products fell. We had to stick together when the waters got rough.
I	(shipwreck)	I fear going down with the ship.
	LOVER:	
A	(betrayal)	They wooed me with all kinds of promises, got me committed to the vision, then let me down.
	(longing)	I keep hoping we'll be back the way we were.
E	(breaking up)	It was so drawn out and painful. I heard rumors long before the break up, but we couldn't start grieving since every one was pretending.
F	(reconciled)	They called it leave, but it was really a lay-off. I can't believe they hired me back!

Table 1, continued

COM-PANY	THEME/ (DYNAMIC)	PHRASES
	AGRICULTURE:	
B	(stunted)	This was a place to be nurtured and grow. There's no place to grow to now.
C	(weeding)	We're told we are the cream of the crop since we survived the lay-off.
C	(overworked)	We're too sparse for the work they pile on us. We just can't produce what they expect.

Discussion

Family themes were the most frequently mentioned. In five of the organizations represented, family themes were used to describe how it used to be, but is no longer. Reports of of changes in identity are frequent, from a family identity of belonging, closeness and support, to a business identity leaving people feeling used, abandoned, deceived.

Family metaphors can be seen as ways to communicate both relational themes and identification issues. One identifies with the company, or with parts of it through the relational theme, creating one big family, or smaller feuding ones. For example, in Company B, there was a strong sense that family ties became stronger as the members fought together on all levels to retain

their identity in the face of a leveraged buy-out. The "we-they" paradigm became "we, the whole company" against"they, the purchasing enemy." After the sale, and changes in several top personnel, original members talked about being a "stepfamily," with all the trimmings usually associated with step parents: it used to be fun to work here, we were close-knit, nobody cares about us kids anymore. There were varying amounts of cohesiveness among the old-timers, but the alienation from upper management triggered competition and sibling rivalry.

The vehicle or machine metaphor was used frequently, but indirectly. Phrases to describe the old days, were well-tuned, running smoothly, on the right track, we were all going in the same direction, pulling together. Current times were characterized by burn-out, falling apart, jumping ship, going down with the ship, and some more positive phrases like, hold onto the wheel, keep your eye on the road.

In company G, the cause of financial trouble and subsequent downsizing was seen as the result of the changes in the world market for their product. This perception, in addition to the perception that management was doing everything possible to keep the company afloat, created a sense of cohesiveness in the midst of tumultuous world seas. Internal conflict was almost non-existent, but grief was projected onto the external elements.

The lover was a third important theme. It was as indirect and hidden as the machine metaphor (no one ever used the word vehicle or lover), but the implications for this type of relationship was present. Clients would say that they thought "we" had something going, and then the company, or their boss, lost interest in them and was looking to others for direction. They were jilted, rejected, grieving over the loss (of the way it was), and learning to let go. Or they felt impotent, inadequate, and somehow responsible for the dissatisfaction they now felt--very similar to the dynamics experienced in rejection from a love relationship.

In a unique identification metaphor, employees who survived progressive lay-offs from Company C felt proud and special, "the cream of the crop", at the same time that they felt fenced-in, abused and ploughed under because they were overloaded with the work left behind by leavers. The metaphor had begun earlier as management sowed the policy of "growing our own managers" (or promote from within). As in Company B, the change in business left less room to grow.

One of the interviewed counselors mentioned that her client "complained of being complimented as the cream of the crop because the people in her department who were laid-off were seen as competent." The metaphor was extended to observations that the company did unnecessary weeding and, in fact, weeded out some

viable, productive employees in the eyes of the stayers. This perception on the part of employees is not likely to engender trust in a management team that cannot tell the weeds from the vine.

Most of these themes reflect the past condition in contrast to the present as states of conflict, but they also reflect, in some instances, combinations of identities beyond a simple commitment to the organization as a whole. Also, some clues are given about the impressions and feelings that lead people to continue to identify, or alternatively, disidentify. Owen (1984) suggests (concerning relational themes) that it is possible that certain expressions of metaphor may predict continued commitment versus potential breakdown of the relationship, and may be used therapeutically to help individuals through transitions. A parallel application for metaphorical findings could be used in organizations during times of change.

If it is possible to detect disturbances in the symbolic language of commitment and catch the interruption of equilibrium, it becomes feasible to understand the changing behaviors and attitudes of commitment as they are occurring in dynamic form.

Implications For Further Research

A more complete study of an organization in transition using direct collection of data, particularly on-line discourse (see Bantz, 1983), could bring a much richer and more accurate picture

of the nature of commitment. Spradley's ethnographic approach (1979) for studying culture another suggested method for this purpose. Ethnographic analysis is the search for the parts of a culture and their relationships as conceptualized by informants (Spradley, 1979). Spradley's approach embraces the language and associated behaviors of the people studied and allows informants to guide the agenda, since they will better understand what is worth exploring. He recommends considering the network of symbols employed to understand how people have constructed their reality, but warns against trying to get them to articulate abstract assumptions about details and concrete applications. It is important to let the individuals under study teach the researcher about themselves, especially if a specific approach (i.e.,metaphor analysis) is being used to explore a specific cultural phenomenon (commitment). The outcome of such an approach is likely to reveal a rich description of the organization under study, bringing a better understanding of the organizing principles that create commitment. What it will not give us is sweeping generalizations about commitment to be applied cross-organizationally.

Although such a study of commitment would set the central agenda a priori, the researcher needs to take care not to narrowly define what commitment means, but rather allow the process of discovery to define commitment in the context of human experience

and its meaningful relationship to associated experiences. With such data gathered from recommended further research, themes that were partially exposed through this pilot study could be analyzed in several important ways, possibly answering the following questions:

How does the language of identity bind people to (or alienate them from) the values and goals of the organization? Using interviews and tape recordings of formal and informal meetings, it might be possible to detect a relationship between the metaphors used by those providing direction, and those who follow the strategies set from above. Whether the relationship is positively or negatively correlated would have implications for commitment to the necessary strategic direction of the organization. It is possible that alignment of the metaphoric language of commitment may vary from a whole-organization perspective to a small group perspective, much the same way that employee perceptions of identity may vary from company-as-family to individuals-as-islands. The question then, is not whether employees are committed or not, but rather what are they committed to?

What is the effect of conflicting dynamics present in a complex metaphor, or multiple metaphors? The dominant theme of an organization could be analyzed to see if divergent applications of metaphor are facilitating or hindering commitment during

transition. For example, the family theme may bring people closer during hard times, but often breaks down if family norms are violated, as in the case with Company C. Also, competing themes (multiple metaphors) may indicate internal division and strife. This type of analysis may enhance understanding of the types of conflicts that emerge from differing points of view held by different factions within the organization, and may ultimately lead to learning the language necessary for resolving such conflicts (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

To answer either of these questions, it would be helpful to examine the creation and interaction of metaphors, particularly as they reflect the experience of change in the socialization process. Methods of tracking the birth and growth of metaphoric networks would assist in this search.

<u>If metaphors are intentionally managed in a way that promotes commitment, to what end is that occurring?</u> It is possible that the efforts to introduce and cultivate commitment- enhancing metaphors are unconscious means for control. The critical view of organizations would imply that this is happening. It may be possible to translate what is found on the surface in the context of commitment and uncover the constraints and meaning of a deeper structure (Deetz & Kersten, 1983). Because the power of commitment and identity is so great in influencing people to align themselves

with organizational goals and values, it would be important to examine this aspect of the process, and expose the purposes of such activity.

Conclusion

Organizations are changing rapidly, and our ability to learn about and improve factors measured in stable environments is decreasing. If we continue to focus on snapshots of the organization, expecting that the manipulation of a couple of variables will lead to increased productivity and decreased turnover, we will fail. Unless we learn to study these so-called variables in the context of frequent upheavals and relate our understanding to fundamental human experience and meaning, we will miss the complexity of influences on organizational behavior. But more importantly, unless we view commitment as identification and symbolic interaction, and handle this process ethically and critically, we will be subject to the historical and continuing tendency to find ways to manipulate to the ends of the organization.

APPENDIX 1

PHONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

COUNSELOR NAME_____DATE_____

COMPANY/TYPE OF BUSINESS_____

NATURE OF CHANGE:
___DOWNSIZING ___MERGER ___ACQUISITION ___REORGANIZATION

DURING THE TIME OF CHANGE, DID YOU SEE ANY CHANGES IN PATTERNS OF EAP USE? WHAT WERE THEY?

NATURE OF CHANGE:

___BEFORE

___DURING

___AFTER

WHAT KINDS OF ISSUES RELATED TO THE CHANGES DID PEOPLE TALK ABOUT? HOW DID THEY EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS ABOUT THE ISSUES?

DID THEY TALK ABOUT THE CHANGES IN TERMS OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY OR COMMITMENT? DESCRIBE...

CAN YOU REMEMBER ANY METAPHORS THAT CLIENTS TALKED ABOUT CONCERNING THE ORGANIZATION, THE CHANGE, OR THEIR WORKING RELATIONSHIPS? DESCRIBE...

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